

Week Ending Friday, February 23, 1996

**Remarks Prior to a Roundtable
Discussion on Floods in Wilkes-
Barre, Pennsylvania**
February 16, 1996

Thank you very much. Well, Jim, I was looking at the pictures behind me while you were talking, trying to visualize what you all have been through. And I want to just begin by thanking you and everyone who worked with you for the way you handled this, and also the people of this area for the way they handled it.

Governor, Congressman, Mayor, we're all honored to be here with you. I'm here, obviously, along with the James Lee Witt and a number of people from the Federal Government who were privileged to work with you. We have Dave Sharma from the Department of Transportation, a number of people here from SBA, General Genega from the Corps of Engineers, and Martin Lancaster, the Assistant Secretary for Civil Works. And I'll have more to say about them in a moment.

I think all of you know that the Governor and your two United States Senators who had to go back to work and Congressman Kanjorski, and Congressman Holden and I, along with our FEMA Director, James Lee Witt, just toured Parkin Street with the mayor. And I must say I was very moved by the spirit of the people there. They told me some of the stories and I went over to the place where the water came out and I saw the damage there to the canal.

I have—I followed this problem with great interest, and, of course, even though I was a long way away and not in public life then, I have very vivid memories of that 1972 flood. Everyone in America saw it unfolding and saw the suffering that all of you went through. And I want to say that I know there were other places which really suffered in the Wyoming Valley. We have people here, I think, from Plains, Avoca, and Shickshinny

and Lycoming County. There was, I think, the Governor told me—I think you had 12 people lost their lives in this flood. So I just want to say to all the people of Pennsylvania how much I appreciate what you went through.

I also—in these natural disasters I never cease to be amazed by the courage and ingenuity and stamina people show. I just met a—when I was out West I met a man who was a retired employee of the public utility in this little town where I visited. He was a Norwegian immigrant well up into his sixties, and to help the town deal with the aftermath of the flood, he worked for 8 hours on a jackhammer with a cracked rib. And that's the sort of thing that you see all over America.

I want to compliment Eric Malone here who is, as I understand it, only 19, and he used his jet ski to pull five people from the Juniata River. I couldn't even stay on a jet ski. *[Laughter]* And I'm impressed that he got himself and others on. I thank Jean Wilde for coordinating the evacuation of Mercy Hospital and the work that you are continuing to do. And I thank you, sir. I can't believe that you evacuated 100,000 people. For those of us who were not here when this flood occurred, we saw the pictures, but I don't think that the dimensions of it hit home in the rest of America until it was announced that you were actually evacuating 100,000 people. We saw the pictures of all of these people leaving their homes. It made a profound impact on everyone.

We want to continue to do our part at the national level through all of the Federal agencies. FEMA has already invested \$35 million in response and recovery effort here, and that number will continue to climb. The Small Business Administration, I believe, has already approved about \$11½ million in home and business loans. The Corps of Engineers is here, and the fact that Martin Lan-

caster and Bill Coleman are both here is very encouraging to me.

To date, the Department of Transportation has allocated \$11 million to help repair roads that were damaged by the floods, and today I am pleased to announce—I talked to Secretary Peña just before coming here—that we will provide another \$10 million for that purpose. That will give you \$21 million to deal with the roads. And FEMA is going to give this city another \$400,000 to repair the damage along Parkin Street to the canal.

But that, I think, is just the beginning. I think the Federal housing assistance to the State, Governor, will run somewhere in the neighborhood of \$10 million for the people who have had their homes damaged. And I'm sure there will be more.

One of the things that you mentioned that I wanted to emphasize is that in 1993, after we dealt with the impacts of the terrible flooding in the Middle West, and the Governor was still in Congress then—you remember, we changed the law to permit, I think, up to 15 percent of the total losses in any given State to be used for the State to develop a mitigation plan to avert such things happening again. And we estimate that you will probably have somewhere in the neighborhood of \$15 million that you can put into mitigation.

And so I would urge you to make maximum use of that, to come up with whatever plans you can to avert this from happening again. And, of course, that would be over and above the work that the Corps of Engineers has now agreed to do. And I think Congressman Kanjorski announced this last night. But I want to emphasize that the Corps has now agreed to move forward with a contract that can be done now that this preliminary agreement has been made, and we can start work on that this year to make sure that the Wyoming Valley will never be subject to a flood like that which came in 1972. And I think that's very important.

And I believe they're prepared to provide some extra protection as well. I know—the Governor and I were talking about the other communities in this area and in the State that were damaged by the flood. I think FEMA has already made available about \$2½ million to local governments, and as you need

it there is more available there to help the local governments try to deal with the problems that they sustained in the flood.

So the main point I want to make to you is, I am grateful to all of you for what you have done, and we will do our part. And the thing that I am determined to do is to see that we stay with you until all the work is done, until you've returned to normal, until you've got everything back the way it ought to be. And we'll stay all the way through.

I've already said more than I meant to. I'd like to spend some time now hearing from the rest of the people around the table if you want to tell me how you think we should do that.

NOTE: The President spoke at 12 noon in the chapel at King's College. In his remarks, he referred to Jim Siracuse, emergency management director, Luzerne County; Gov. Tom Ridge of Pennsylvania; Mayor Thomas McGroarty of Wilkes-Barre; and William Coleman, Deputy Administrator for Federal Procurement Policy, Office of Management and Budget. This item was not received in time for publication in the appropriate issue.

Remarks to the Community in Wilkes-Barre

February 16, 1996

The President. Thank you very much.

Audience member. We love you!

The President. Thank you.

Audience member. Hillary, too!

The President. Thank you very much.

I want to begin by saying that Patrick Murphy did not have the easiest job in the world today and that all of his fellow students who stood up and cheered him may have made it a little harder even. [Laughter] But he hung in there, and he did it very well. And he spoke powerfully about this community and his people. I think we ought to give him another hand. [Applause]

Father Lackenmier, I want to congratulate you on the 50th anniversary of King's College. You know the Vice President was in Pennsylvania just a couple of days ago to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the first computer, ENIAC, over in Philadelphia. So Pennsylvania now has three 50-year-olds: ENIAC, King's College, and me.